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SUBJECT: POROUS BORDERS, LOW ANTI-DRUG CAPACITY IN VIETNAM'S CENTER

Ref: 03 Hanoi 1504

1. (U) Summary: Authorities in central Vietnam appear enthusiastic about supporting the national anti-drug policy, but have limited capacity and training. The land border with Laos is porous and difficult to control, making this a likely route for narcotics traffickers and a possible route for terrorists. One of these remote border checkpoints might be an excellent place to apply the INL-funded Contraband Enforcement Team Program under the new Counternarcotics agreement. End Summary.

2. (U) On an April 19-21 visit to Quang Binh and Quang Tri provinces, Poloff met with representatives of the provincial People's Councils, the counternarcotics police, the Women's Unions, and the Departments of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs. Officials in both provinces were quick to state that their provinces had only a "small problem" with drug use, and noted that all drugs entering the province were from other provinces or from across the border and usually carried by addicts. They acknowledged that the land borders with Laos were in forested mountain areas riddled with footpaths beyond official control. Only the single international border gate in each province was staffed for inspections and immigration controls.

Quang Binh

3. (U) This long, narrow province north of the former demilitarized zone (DMZ) has a population of 800,000 people, most of whom are engaged in farming and fishing activities along the coast. The capital, Dong Hoi, is a fishing town with tourist potential. According to Nguyen Vinh of the Quang Binh Department of Foreign Affairs, the road network near the long border with Laos is "very basic," and trade and communication are "limited by weak infrastructure."

4. (U) Drug trafficking into or through Quang Binh is "scattered and small," claimed Colonel Tu Huong Son, deputy director of the Provincial Police. There are no "big syndicates" operating in Quang Binh, he added. Since 2001, Quang Binh police had seized only 28 tablets of ATS, 3.7 grams of heroin, 21 "doses" of heroin, and 19 ampoules of "additive pharmaceuticals." According to Son, the entire province has only 70 drug addicts, while police "suspected" another 167 people of possible drug use.

5. (U) Because the number of addicts in Quang Binh was so small, there was no need for a treatment center, said Nguyen An Dung, Deputy Director of the Social Security and Welfare Office of the Department of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs. DOLISA officials from Quang Binh had visited other provinces, such as Yen Bai and Tuyen Quang in the north, and "inspected" their drug treatment models, Dung noted. Quang Binh was following the Yen Bai model of "community treatment" because it had only a 15 percent relapse rate, Dung claimed. [Note: this figure is absurd. "Community treatment" in Vietnam means sending addicts home - often the same environment where they began using drugs - with an admonition to stop using drugs and instructions to the family and local civic organizations to "help" the addict. It does not work. Some officials have admitted privately that actual relapse rates for community treatment in Vietnam exceed 95 percent, a figure that UNODC also feels is accurate. End note.]

6. (U) Col. Son admitted that because all traffic going between north and south in Vietnam had to pass through Quang Binh, it was "likely" that drugs were transiting his province. However, "we've never found any," he said, "but we aren't looking at traffic coming through Quang Binh." He similarly noted that police had never found drugs on any of the boats that used the harbor in Dong Hoi, but had not looked for them there, either.

Quang Tri

7. (U) Officials in Quang Tri province, immediately to the south of Quang Binh, made similar claims regarding the low number of drug users in the province, but acknowledged that

the border gate of Lao Bao had a high volume of truck cargo from elsewhere in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Laos, and Burma, which could easily contain undetected contraband. Director Hoang Dang Mai of the Quang Tri Department of Foreign Affairs estimated that "hundreds" of trucks passed this border gate each day, and that the total traffic in the first three months of 2004 was 11,500 vehicles. According to Hoang Van Cu, the Deputy Director of the Provincial Customs Bureau of Quang Tri, Vietnamese customs officials performed "random" checks on vehicles, and "sometimes" received information that led them to check certain vehicles "more carefully." For example, "sometimes we receive instructions to check all vehicles from Malaysia," Cu added.

18. (U) Cu and Mai separately acknowledged that because of the numerous "forest paths and rivers" it was "extremely hard" to control smuggling across the border into Quang Tri. To combat this problem, the province had begun to employ two mobile customs checkpoints that could be deployed farther from the border, Cu said. One of those teams had caught a shipment of 5,000 methamphetamine pills in November 2003, for example. In June 2003, the border guards at Lao Bao had made a "huge" heroin seizure, Mai noted, using information developed from "informants" (reftel).

19. (U) Cu added that Quang Tri customs received "frequent" information on travelers who could be terrorist risks, but noted that this information was often "general" and did not have enough specifics to provide an action recommendation for border control workers. He noted that as long as a vehicle had a "Vietnamese transit permit," it could continue right into Vietnam. "Many times," Cu noted, trucks transiting the Lao Bao border gate were headed for southern China via the Vietnamese border gate at Mong Cai.

10. (U) Comment: Quang Binh and Quang Tri, located at a narrow choke point between north and south Vietnam, would be an excellent place for Vietnamese customs and police to scrutinize vehicle traffic for contraband, drugs, or terrorists. Police and customs capacity in these provinces, however, is so low that there is effectively no action other than responding to specific, detailed requests from higher authorities. The Lao Bao border gate, with a high volume of international truck traffic, would be a good location for international assistance in improving the capacity of Vietnamese border forces. In particular, the Contraband Enforcement Team Program being implemented under the Counternarcotics Agreement could be applied effectively in Lao Bao, a place Vietnamese anti-smuggling official Le Thanh Hien calls a "drug hotspot."
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